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By Brendan James | April 18, 2014 10:43 a.m.

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A new study from Princeton spells bad news for American democracy—namely, that it no longer exists.

Asking "[w]ho really rules?" researchers Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page argues that over the past few decades America's political system has slowly transformed from a democracy into an oligarchy, where wealthy elites wield most power.

Using data drawn from over 1,800 different policy initiatives from 1981 to 2002, the two conclude that rich, well-connected individuals on the political scene now steer the

direction of the country, regardless of or even against the will of the majority of voters.

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"The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy," they write, "while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence."

As one illustration, Gilens and Page compare the political preferences of Americans at the 50th income percentile to preferences of Americans at the 90th percentile as well as major lobbying or business groups. They find that the government—whether Republican or Democratic—more often follows the preferences of the latter group rather than the first.

The researches note that this is not a new development caused by, say, recent Supreme Court decisions allowing more money in politics, such as Citizens United or this month's ruling on McCutcheon v. FEC. As the data stretching back to the 1980s suggests, this has been a long term trend, and is therefore harder for most people to perceive, let alone reverse.

"Ordinary citizens," they write, "might often be observed to 'win' (that is, to get their preferred policy outcomes) even if they had no independent effect whatsoever on policy making, if elites (with whom they often agree) actually prevail."

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